THE OTHER PRODIGAL
Luke 15:11-32
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Most, if not all, older brothers and older sisters, feel cheated: if not cheated, at least smug. There is something about parenting and parents in general which makes the whole project more intense the first time around. The first child, typically, is subjected to more parental attention, more rules, demands and hopes than any other children who might happen along. Perhaps it is because we are so young at the time, but most of us were convinced that our first child was the best ever in every way, and that our solemn and grave responsibility was to maintain that standard thereafter. Psychologists are interested in first children and the dynamic of their special relationship with parents. Many Presidents were older brothers, and I am told, a majority of clergymen.

By the time the second, third and fourth child comes along parents are older and therefore wiser, not as intense, more relaxed, and probably better parents. Invariably the rules are loosened a bit: parents no longer believe the world will come to an end if their children don't clean their plates, go to bed precisely at 8:00 or practice the piano thirty minutes per day. All of which allows the oldest child to say - "When I was that age you made me eat spinach," and although it sounds like social protest, it feels good, actually. I know about it. I am an older brother. I have always loved that old Boystown poster: one boy carrying another and saying, "He ain't heavy, Father, he's my brother." I know about that: but I also know that most of the time that isn't the way it is. Most of the time the older brother says: "Here we go again: him riding free, and me doing the work."

The Parable which is our text today is for older Brothers or Sisters, literal or figurative. It is for the hard workers who never had a fling in the Far Country, but stayed at home, loyally, gladly, to get the job done. It is one of the most remarkable tales ever told: it has been called the perfect short story. Helmut Thielicke introduces it by telling about his young son, seeing a full length mirror for the first time, being fascinated with the figure in the mirror and after a period of time saying, "That's me in there." Thielicke suggests, and I have experienced, that the more you think about this deceptively simple little story the more you will say: "That's me in there."

The name Prodigal Son really doesn't describe it adequately. It is about a father with two sons. It is about his relationship with each of them. It is about him and the dominating strength of his love. The younger son is the one for whom the story is named traditionally. He is more dramatic and therefore more interesting than his brother. His attraction and popularity is that almost everybody can feel good in comparison with him. But if prodigality means wasteful squandering - the real prodigal is the elder brother. He is the character Jesus intended to dramatize, I believe. He represents unresolved tension when the story ends. There is a real possibility of a happy ending for the younger son; but the older brother is still outside. However, it is the father, whose strength empowers the entire sequence. It is, finally, a story about him.

The story begins in the hearer's imagination. "A younger son" means there is an older son, and we know who he is without meeting him. We know that in this family there is a stable, hardworking young man who is the heir apparent, who takes the management of the farms and herds very seriously, who is by his father's side every day and at his board each night. We know the special love the father has for his oldest son: his right-hand man.

The story introduces the younger son with his request to his father for his share of the inheritance: not a very flattering beginning. Rudyard Kipling wrote an intriguing little poem on the story. Let him introduce the younger brother:

"My father glooms and advises me,
My brother sulks and despises me,
And mother catechizes me
Till I want to go out and swear."

(The Prodigal Son, Rudyard Kipling's Verse Definitive Edition, p. 580-581).

NO WAY -

He had a legal claim to one third of his father's assets. Wordlessly, wisely, his father grants the request. But there must have been endless hours of discussing and arguing. Thielecke imagines them in that ageless father-son debate - Son: "My freedom means to be able to do what I want to do." Father: "And for me freedom means that you should become what you ought to be." (The Waiting Father, p.19).

There is no resolution to that dialogue, of course. And so he goes - away - as he must - and Kipling has him say:

"I never was very refined, you see,
(And it weighs on my brother's mind, you see)
But there's no reproach among swine, d'you see,
For being a bit of a swine.
So I'm off with wallet and staff to eat
The bread that is three parts chaff to wheat,
But glory be! - there's a laugh to it,
Which isn't the case when we dine."

Maybe that boy had to go. Maybe there was no way for him to discover who he was and what life is about in the long shadow of that older brother. In any event he went, and did all the things he always wanted to do and then made an amazing discovery. The party is over when the money is gone. Reduced to poverty and despair the story has him working on a hog farm - for a Jew - the absolute lowest, most degrading work on the face of the earth. In fact, to be in daily contact with swine was to deny race and religion and identity: it was to be permanently unclean. Hungry too, apparently; hungry enough to contemplate the swill and decide to steal instead.

There is a school of thought that refuses to applaud the fellow for what he does next. It probably is a mistake to attribute his decision to altruism. Very simply, he remembers where there are three square meals a day. Now that memory didn't just pop into his mind. In fact, it was an obsession with him, morning, noon and night, - all that food in the dining room at home. The only problem is how to go back without having the door slammed in his face. So he composes a speech, and as he's feeding the hogs he goes over it and over it until he has it down, and then he heads home.

His brother, meanwhile, is still working hard: all day long, only now he has to work hard at the dinner table because his father is misty eyed more often than not, and conversation takes a morbid turn without anyone intending it and he has to try hard to be cheerful and optimistic and light.

Every morning the old man takes a walk before breakfast, down the road a bit, to the point where you can see through the valley for miles, and the son knows what he's doing. Lately, he's been taking the same walk at noon and again at dusk. He's watching that road like a hawk.

And then one day, in the heat of the noon sun, he lets out a shout and the older brother sees him flying down the road to meet the ragged, but unmistakable figure coming the other way. In the near East, men of age and substance ran nowhere, even when they were in a hurry. It was undignified: he should have waited - or walked with ponderous dignity. But he ran and the startled, filthy hog hand started his speech but only got a few words out because his father's arms were around him. And unlike any father I ever heard of he doesn't say "I told you so" or "I hope you've learned you lesson" or "Maybe now you'll settle down and be sensible". (See F. Beuchner, Telling the Truth, p.67ff). Instead he barks out a few orders to the servants to get a party going - "Who cares why he's back? All that matters is that he's here: we thought he was dead and he's alive!"

Frederick Beuchner writes perceptively: "I think that these parables can be read as jokes about God in the sense that what they are essentially about is the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people...Is it possible that it is only when you hear the Gospel as a wild and marvelous joke that you really hear it at all?" (Ibid, p. 66, 68).

And so the party begins, and it's just party enough that the laughter and the music carry out across the fields to where the older brother is finishing up and he can't believe what he's hearing. He had not run to meet his brother because he was busy and wanted to complete whatever he was doing and, as had happened so many times before, time had slipped away. Could it be possible that the party had begun already? And the more he thought about it as he leaned onto his hoe the angrier he became - and the angrier he became the more impossible it seemed that he could naturally and gracefully join the celebration. And after a while his father came to him, knowing as fathers and mothers always do, exactly what was wrong, and asked him to join the party.

The older son, by this point, is in such a state that he insults the old man by refusing to address him; launching instead into that timeless older brother litany - "all these years I've worked and you never had a party for me" - and then, he showed his complete disdain by refusing even to acknowledge the family tie: "this son of yours": not my brother but "your son", as in "your son broke a window this morning": or "your son wet the bed last night": or "your son wants his daddy to put him in tonight". Buechner thinks he is guilty of all the deadly sins in his tirade: "Envy and pride and anger and covetousness: sloth and lust - as he invokes even the prostitutes with whom his brother has been living." (Ibid, p.68).

Kipling imagines that the younger son leaves home again after the banquet: free now to leave for the right reasons -

"So back I go to my job again,
Not so easy to rob again,
Or quite so ready to sob again
On any neck that's around.
I'm leaving Pater, Good bye to you!
God bless you, Mater! I'll write to you -
I wouldn't be impolite to you,
But brother, you <u>are</u> a hound."

The tragedy of this parable - and I think it is at least fifty percent classic tragedy - is that the older brother, for some reason, doesn't feel loved. It's very easy to be critical of him. It's easy to see that he in the original context represents those self-righteous scribes and Pharisees who were so critical of Jesus ahd His associations: those pious men who hounded Him to His death. It's easy to be self-righteous about self-righteousness. But the father doesn't criticize his eldest son either. The father loves him steadfastly and steadily - as always - without malice or demand. But they don't embrace, as he and his younger son had done: they can't embrace. I get the impression they gave up embracing when he was about thirteen: that the boy pulled back, because he didn't feel loved and began to forget how to love, and started to try to earn his father's love,... which is what he had been doing all those years out in the field. I, frankly, see the tragedy and reality of our human situation here - in the shriveled, mean and sad heart of that pathetic son.

The most radical idea in the Bible is the idea of grace. Religion always has a bit of trouble with it. Grace is the word theologians assign to the truth millions upon millions of people have discovered; namely, that in Jesus Christ God loves them: that God's love has no strings attached to it: it cannot be earned: it cannot be shut off: it can't be escaped. God loves us as we are, in spite of what we are. There is nothing we can do to make Him love us less. He loves us even when we can't stand ourselves.

The idea itself offends us somewhat. We like to pull our own weight and earn our own way. If we are loved by God, or anyone else for that matter, we'd like to think it's because we have made ourselves so lovable. We are offended by the suggestion that God doesn't pay much attention to the goodness we accumulate: that He actually does love the scoundrel as much as He loves us.

We believe that love is negotiable. How much you get depends on how much you earn. Swiss psychiatrist and theologian Paul Tournier writes: "...from infancy on all trauma is connected with this doubt about being loved...The child has the impression that his parents' love is conditional: that they will love him on the condition that he is good." (Guilt and Grace, p.189).

Tournier teaches that the dynamic - the conditional nature of love, and our fear that we won't get it unless we work at earning it becomes a very important religious phenomenon. People believe that God will love them only on the condition that they are good, and life becomes a very grim and determined effort to measure up, to prove oneself, to earn God's love.

That's what happened to the Elder Brother in the parable and that is what the story intends to emphasize: grace and the common inability of most of us to cope with it, - which means to relax and enjoy it: in theological terms to enjoy the salvation God has given.

The story is important theology. It portrays the father's first concern as the wholeness and unbroken unity of his family. The young son breaks it with his sojourn in a far country. And just as it appears that the family will be whole again his older brother breaks it. The father's love strains to heal. But his eldest son can't respond. In fact, the older brother doesn't seem to realize it but his relationship with his father is broken because of the disdain he feels for his brother.

That is an important dynamic. God wants most of all for His family to be together. His will and purpose in history is to bring all people together in harmony, justice and peace. If this parable is to be trusted, there is a banquet in Heaven this week. God the Father is very pleased because two brothers - or two sisters - Israel and Egypt - have sat down together and the whole family is a little closer.

We know, I think, what it is to be separated. We may never have been so spectacularly prodigal as the young son - but we know, I think, what it means to be in a far country. We know, perhaps even better, what it means to be in the self-inflicted exile of the older brother, the far country of feeling unloved, the loneliness of striving to prove one's own worth. He remains outside as the story ends. He was invited to the banquet table, but for a variety of reasons he could not go in. We know how that feels.

He was convinced that his worth as a person depended on the work he produced. He had all the makings of a joyless workaholic. He couldn't enjoy or even feel his father's love for him.

The Good News is that the Father does love him and will continue to love him. The Good News is that God loves us: that our worth as persons is a product - not of the work we do, the accomplishments we achieve, or the money we earn, but of our Father's love. The Good News is that both sons are invited and welcome at the Father's table and that the Father will not rest until both are there.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is that the reconciliation of each of His children is worth the life of God's Son: the Good News is that the love of God pursues His children into whatever far country they stray. The old hymn says it best -

"Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
Tis grace has brought me safe this far,
And grace will lead me home."

The elder brother, working in the field, sweating, boiling in resentment in wounded pride, and frustrated love, heard music - the music of a reunion celebration from his father's house. It tugged at his heart, but he would not and could not and did not join the banquet. We don't, of course, know what that music was like. But it could have been "Amazing Grace": for that is always the music at God's banquet.

Hear it anew today. Let it call you home. Let your father God love you. Let His love send you to the table of humanity, part of the family again - safe, free, loved.

Amen.

Father, sometimes it offends our sense of fairness that You should love all of us. Sometimes we find it difficult to think about Your love for us. Help us to lay aside all the devices we use to prove our worth. Open us to the miracle of Your grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.